

Lenin on Imperialism

By LEON TROTSKY

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The eighteenth anniversary of Lenin's death (he died January 21, 1924) finds our planet engulfed in the second World War.

In the midst of the first world slaughter Lenin had predicted this second slaughter. Still more, he predicted that so long as imperialism survived world conflicts would unfailingly follow. Should imperialism also survive this present war, there will come a third, and a fourth. . . .

By means of the same scientific method which enabled him to predict the course of events under the continued rule of imperialism, Lenin arrived at a realistic program of struggle — the only program which offers society a way out from its impasse.

Lenin reached his maturity in the period of the first World War. His analysis of imperialist wars and the conclusions he drew from this analysis are among the greatest triumphs of Marxism. It was the Leninist program against imperialism that paved the way for the victory of the Russian masses in October 1917. And this victory in its turn resulted in the termination of the first imperialist world war (emphasis by the Web Ed.)

No program other than Lenin's offers today salvation to mankind.

We can think of nothing more appropriate for 1942 than the publication of Trotsky's brilliant summary of the Leninist conclusions from the war of 1914-1918. The document was written by Leon Trotsky early in 1939. This is the first time it appears in English.—THE EDITORS (of the monthly Fourth International, published by the SWP-US, whose leaders were jailed for their opposition to this World War 2 which broke out when Hitler led Germany's invasion into Poland in September 1939 -- Web ed.).

With the outbreak of the war in August 1914 the first question which arose was this: Should the socialists of imperialist countries assume the "defense of the fatherland"? The issue was not whether or not individual socialists should fulfill the obligations of soldiers — there was no other alternative, desertion is not a revolutionary policy. The issue was: Should socialist parties support the war politically? vote for the war budget? renounce the struggle against the government and agitate for the "defense of the fatherland?" Lenin's answer was: No! the party must not do so, it has no right to do so, not because *war* is involved but because this is *a reactionary war*, because this is a dog fight between the slave-owners for the redivision of the world.

The formation of national states on the European continent occupied an entire epoch which began approximately with the Great French Revolution and concluded with the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. During these dramatic decades the wars were predominantly of a national character. War waged for the creation or defense of national states necessary for the development of productive forces and of culture possessed during this period a profoundly progressive historical character. Revolutionists not only could but were obliged to support national wars politically.

From 1871 to 1914 European capitalism, on the foundation of national states, not only flowered but outlived itself by becoming transformed into monopoly or imperialist

capitalism. "Imperialism is that stage of capitalism when the latter after fulfilling everything in its power begins to decline." The cause for decline lies in this, that the productive forces are equally fettered by the framework of private property as well as the boundaries of the national state. Imperialism seeks to divide and re-divide the world. In place of national wars there come imperialist wars. They are utterly reactionary in character and are an expression of the impasse, stagnation, and decay of monopoly capital.

The Reactionary Nature of Imperialism

The world, however, still remains very heterogeneous. The coercive imperialism of advanced nations is able to exist only because backward nations, oppressed nationalities, colonial and semi-colonial countries remain on our planet. *The struggle of the oppressed peoples for national unification and national independence is doubly progressive because, on the one side, this prepares more favorable conditions for their own development while, on the other side, this deals blows to imperialism. That, in particular, is the reason why in the struggle between a civilized, imperialist, democratic republic and a backward, barbaric monarchy in a colonial country, the socialists are completely on the side of the oppressed country notwithstanding its monarchy and against the oppressor country notwithstanding its "democracy."* (emphasis by the Web Ed.)

Imperialism camouflages its own peculiar aims — seizure of colonies, markets, sources of raw material, spheres of influence — with such ideas as "safeguarding peace against the aggressors," "defense of the fatherland," "defense of democracy," etc. These ideas are false through and through. It is the duty of every socialist not to support them but, on the contrary, to unmask them before the people. "The question of which group delivered the first military blow or first declared war," wrote Lenin in March 1915, "has no importance whatever in determining the tactics of socialists. Phrases about the defense of the fatherland, repelling invasion by the enemy, conducting a defensive war, etc. are on both sides a complete deception of the people." "For decades," explained Lenin, "three bandits (the bourgeoisies and governments of England, Russia and France) armed themselves to despoil Germany. Is it surprising that the two bandits (Germany and Austria-Hungary) launched an attack before the three bandits succeeded in obtaining the new knives they had ordered?"

The objective historical meaning of the war is of decisive importance for the proletariat: What class is conducting it? and for the sake of what? This is decisive and not the subterfuges of diplomacy by means of which the enemy can always be successfully portrayed to the people as an aggressor. Just as false are the references by imperialists to the slogans of democracy and culture. ". . . The German bourgeoisie . . . deceives the working class and the toiling masses by vowing that the war is being waged for the sake of . . . freedom and culture, for the sake of freeing the peoples oppressed by Czarism. The English and French bourgeoisies . . . deceive the working class and the toiling masses by vowing that they are waging war . . . against German militarism and despotism." A political super-structure of one kind or another cannot change the reactionary economic foundation of imperialism. On the contrary, it is the foundation which subordinates the

super-structure to itself. "In our day . . . it is silly even to think of a progressive bourgeoisie, a progressive bourgeois movement. All bourgeois 'democracy' . . . has become reactionary." This appraisal of imperialist "democracy" constitutes the cornerstone of the entire Leninist conception.

Since war is waged by both imperialist camps not for the defense of the fatherland or democracy but for the re-division of the world and colonial enslavement, a socialist has no right to prefer one bandit camp to another. Absolutely in vain is any attempt to "determine, from the standpoint of the international proletariat, whether the defeat of one of the two warring groups of nations would be a lesser evil for socialism." In the very first days of September 1914, Lenin was already characterizing the content of the war for each of the imperialist countries and for all the groupings as follows: "The struggle for markets and for plundering foreign lands, the eagerness to head off the revolutionary movement of the proletariat and to crush democracy within each country, the urge to deceive, divide and crush the proletarians of all countries, to incite the wage slaves of one nation against the wage slaves of another nation for the profits of the bourgeoisie — that is the only real content and meaning of the war." How far removed is all this from the current doctrine of Stalin, Dimitrov and Co.!

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It is impossible to fight against imperialist war by sighing for peace after the fashion of the pacifisms. "One of the ways of fooling the working class is pacifism and the abstract propaganda of peace. Under capitalism, especially in its imperialist stage, wars are inevitable." A peace concluded by imperialists would only be a breathing spell before a new war. Only a revolutionary mass struggle against war and against imperialism which breeds war can secure a real peace. "Without a number of revolutions the so-called democratic peace is a middle-class Utopia."

The struggle against the narcotic and debilitating illusions of pacifism enters as the most important element into Lenin's doctrine. He rejected with especial hostility the demand for "disarmament as obviously Utopian under capitalism." (*Note however the central demand of the Western anti-war movement of the 1960s for "unilateral disarmament" as an effective means of countering the threat of imperialist nuclear war and deflecting anti-Soviet propaganda -- Web Ed.*)

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The Roots of Social-Chauvinism

Most of the labor parties in the advanced capitalist countries turned out on the side of their respective bourgeoisies during the war. Lenin named this tendency as *social-chauvinism*: socialism in words, chauvinism in deeds. The betrayal of internationalism did not fall from the skies but came as an inevitable continuation and development of the policies of reformist adaptation. "The ideological-political content of opportunism and of social-chauvinism is one and the same: class collaboration instead of class struggle,

support of one's 'own' government when it is in difficulties instead of utilizing these difficulties for the revolution."

The period of capitalist prosperity immediately prior to the last war — from 1909 to 1913 — tied the upper layers of the proletariat very closely with imperialism. From the super-profits obtained by the imperialist bourgeoisie from colonies and from backward countries in general, juicy crumbs fell to the lot of the labor aristocracy and labor bureaucracy. In consequence, their patriotism was dictated by direct self-interest in the policies of imperialism. During the war which laid bare all social relations "the opportunists and chauvinists were invested with a gigantic power because of their alliance with the bourgeoisie, with the government and with the General Staffs."

The intermediate and perhaps the widest tendency in socialism is the so-called center (Kautsky *et al.*) who vacillated in peace time between reformism and Marxism and who, while continuing to cover themselves with broad pacifist phrases, became almost without exception the captives of social-chauvinists. So far as the masses were concerned they were caught completely off guard and duped by their own apparatus which had been created by them in the course of decades. After giving a sociological and political appraisal of the labor bureaucracy of the Second International, Lenin did not halt midway. "Unity with opportunists is the alliance of workers with their 'own' national bourgeoisie and signifies a split in the ranks of the international revolutionary working class." Hence flows the conclusion that internationalists must break with the social-chauvinists. "It is impossible to fulfill the tasks of socialism at the present time; it is impossible to achieve a genuine international fusion of workers without decisively breaking with opportunism ..." as well as with centrism, "this bourgeois tendency in socialism." The very name of the party must be changed. "Isn't it better to cast aside the name of 'Social-Democrats' which has been smeared and degraded and to return to the old Marxist name of Communists?" It is time to break with the Second International and to build the Third. (*Thus wrote Lenin in 1914 at the outbreak of the First World War, as Trotsky here emphasizes, without mentioning that he himself had just issued the call for a Fourth International in 1938 -- Web Ed.*)

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What has changed in the twenty odd years that have since elapsed? Imperialism has assumed an even more violent and oppressive character. Its most consistent expression is fascism. Imperialist democracies have fallen several rungs lower and are themselves evolving into fascism naturally and organically. (*As*) colonial oppression becomes the more intolerable, all the sharper is the awakening and eagerness of oppressed nationalities for national independence. In other words, all those traits which were lodged in the foundation of Lenin's theory of imperialist war have now assumed a far more graphic and sharp character.

To be sure, communo-chauvinists refer to the existence of the USSR which supposedly introduces a complete overturn into the politics of the international proletariat. To this one can make the following brief reply: Before the USSR arose, there existed oppressed

nations, colonies, etc. whose struggle also merited support. If revolutionary and progressive movements beyond the boundaries of one's own country could be supported by supporting one's own imperialist bourgeoisie then the policy of social-patriotism was in principle correct. There was no reason, then, for founding the Third International. This is one side of the case, but there is also another. The USSR has now been in existence for twenty-two years. For seventeen years the principles of Lenin remained in force. Communo-chauvinist policies took shape only four (*or*) five years ago. The argument from the existence of the USSR is therefore only a false cover.

If a quarter of a century ago Lenin branded as social-chauvinism and as social treachery the desertion of socialists to the side of their nationalist imperialism under the pretext of defending culture and democracy, then from the standpoint of Lenin's principles the very same policy today is all the more criminal. It is not difficult to guess how Lenin would have designated the present day leaders of the Comintern who have revived all the sophistries of the Second International under the conditions of an even more profound decomposition of capitalist civilization.

There is a pernicious paradox in this, that the wretched epigones of the Comintern, who have turned its banner into a dirty rag with which to wipe away the tracks of the Kremlin oligarchy, call those "renegades" who have remained true to the teachings of the founder of the Communist International. Lenin was right: The ruling classes not only persecute great revolutionists during their lifetime but revenge themselves upon them after they are dead by measures even more refined, trying to turn them into ikons whose mission is to preserve "law and order." No one is, of course, under compulsion to take his stand on the ground of Lenin's teachings. But we, his disciples, will permit no one to make mockery of these teachings and to transform them into their very opposite!

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